

Talking Points

Re: Funding for Special Judges in Hinds County Circuit Court

Tuesday, May 30, 2006

When I ran for Governor, I talked about how the criminal justice system in Mississippi's Capital City and Hinds County was broken. Too many people were going unpunished because criminal courts faced an ever-growing backlog of cases, especially cases involving drugs and guns.

Dockets were so crowded that just getting to trial could take years. During that time some defendants still walked the streets when they should have been in jail; but they couldn't be jailed because cells were already overloaded with others awaiting trial. The number of untried defendants in felony cases increased 18 percent in three years.

After I was elected and before I was inaugurated, Attorney General Jim Hood and I discussed the problems facing criminal justice in Hinds County. We discussed the possibility of the appointment of a special judge for a limited period of time and the need to insure that there were enough prosecutors to get criminals prosecuted in the Court effectively. I appreciate his help and concern about this problem.

In my State of the State speech four months ago, I revisited the issue. I said then that Jackson Mayor Frank Melton and Hinds County Sheriff Malcolm McMillan had asked me to help them fight crime -- especially drug and gun crime -- in Jackson.

I asked the Legislature to pass a bill to allow the Governor to appoint a Special Circuit Judge for Hinds County solely for the purpose of hearing criminal cases involving drugs and guns.

Chief Justice Jim Smith asked the Legislature for funding through the Supreme Court for additional special judges who could hear cases and help clear the dockets.

The Legislature said no to both of us in 2006. And the problem has only gotten worse, especially when you consider the impact of displaced individuals in the Jackson area as a result of Hurricane Katrina.

Over the past few months I have been exploring other options with Chief Justice Jim Smith, Sheriff McMillan, Mayor Melton, Judge Yerger and federal authorities.

Today, in view of the pressing public safety concerns, I am announcing that the federal government has agreed with our assessment and I have approved \$160,000 from a special federal Katrina Law Enforcement Grant program to fund two special judgeships for a year.

I emphasize this is one-time money.

The 2007 session of the Legislature will likely be asked for a more permanent solution.

In the meantime, I believe justice delayed is justice denied. I encourage all parties to work diligently to make the criminal justice system in Hinds County more effective.

I'm pleased that we can create this new partnership between local, state and federal government and help our Capital City become an even greater asset to our state, as well as a better home to its citizens.